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SUBJECT: AMBASSADOR MEETS COUNTERNARCOTICS TASK FORCE IN SON
LA PROVINCE

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1. (SBU) Summary: On a March 14-15 visit to Son La Province, the Ambassador received a briefing on U.S. funded, UNODC-administered counternarcotics efforts in the region. Since the inception of this effort, coordination has improved among local, regional and cross-border security officials, and a number of significant drug rings have been broken up. The primary drugs passing through Son La are heroin, opium and methamphetamines. According to local officials, the biggest needs for future enforcement are more support equipment and more training in investigative techniques for officers. End Summary.

2. (SBU) On March 14, the Ambassador met with Le Trong Loan, the Director of the Son La Joint Counternarcotics Task Force Unit (TFU) established under the UNODC G-55 counternarcotics program. Loan explained that he is also the head of the provincial counternarcotics department in the Department of Public Security. The TFU also includes members of the Department of Border Security and the Customs Department. Loan said that the situation in Son La is difficult because the geography and topography of this mountainous province makes it ideal for drug smuggling along the 220 kilometer border it shares with Laos. The GVN has identified Son La as a focal point for the counternarcotics effort in the northwest. Son La is a transit area for trafficked drugs rather than a net consumer, although the TFU does not know the real extent of either problem since the most cases are undetected.

History

3. (SBU) Loan noted that the TFU was founded in 2005. It currently has ten officers: six members come from the Ministry of Public Security (MPS), two members represent the Border Army and two participate on behalf of the Customs Department. The TFU is based in the provincial MPS Department and has three major tasks: aiding MPS drug investigations, border surveillance and aiding Customs Department smuggling investigations. The main drugs found in the area are opium, heroin and methamphetamines, of which heroin seems to be the greatest threat. Loan said that since the TFU's inception counternarcotics efforts in Son La have improved greatly. TFU training has already improved the investigative techniques of fifty Son La police officers. New equipment provided under the project, including cars, motorbikes, radios and cameras, has also helped officers conduct investigations. The TFU has improved cooperation between different departments and has

also helped arrange regional meetings to share information on drug crimes. This cooperation has helped the TFU identify and break up some important smuggling rings which had been operating in Son La for years, although most cases are discovered by tips. The TFU also meets annually with local security officials in the two Laotian provinces that border Son La.

Successes

14. (SBU) Loan stated that since the TFU was established, it has investigated 620 cases involving 876 subjects. They seized 123.8kg of heroin, 50.475kg of opium and 12,504 methamphetamine pills. The TFU has also confiscated two grenades, three AK-47s, six radios, thirty-eight mobile phones, six cars, 122 motorbikes, VND 1 billion (USD 63,000), USD 48,000, 3,000 Laotian Kip, and 13 taels of gold. The TFU unit is able to keep seized equipment for liquidation by a provincial board that gives the proceeds to the TFU's budget. The most recent arrest was of two Chinese men caught in Moc Chau district with 2,008 methamphetamine pills. In all, Loan said that the counternarcotics capacity of the provincial authorities has improved. The amount of methamphetamine seized is already three hundred times greater on an annual basis than before, he said.

Future needs

15. (SBU) Loan identified two main needs for the TFU in the immediate future. First, the TFU needs more equipment, particularly more cars, motorbikes, walkie-talkie radios capable of operating in a mountainous environment and money to hire more officers. Secondly, TFU officers need more training in investigative techniques to become better criminologists.

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16. (SBU) The Ambassador noted that law enforcement and drug interdiction is in the interests of both the United States and Vietnam. Son La, with its long border and excellent highway (Highway 6, which also carries the sinister nickname "the Heroin Highway" because it is a pipeline from opium/heroin source areas to Hanoi), is clearly on the frontlines of this effort. This is a problem that requires joint action because it threatens everyone. We are glad to see that U.S. funding has been well spent by the GVN on TFUs like this one, the Ambassador emphasized.

MARINE